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# Deconstructing Dominant Discourse Using Self-deprecating Humor: A Discourse Analysis of a Consulting with Japanese Female about Hikikomori and NEET

## **Abstract**

This study examines how dominant discourses are deconstructed in a consulting, particularly focusing on self-deprecating humor. Data were collected from a session with a Japanese client whose son was in hikikomori or NEET state, and a transcript of the session was analyzed using positioning theory. Examining several extracts shows how the client's positioning of her son and herself is influenced by some dominant discourses, such as deficit discourse and so on. These dominant discourses are deconstructed by self-deprecating humor, because such ironical self-positioning makes these discourses visible, and defeats the self made by society. We discuss the findings with the word "queer" and cultural power of self-deprecating humor. This study contributes to understanding the way of cultural resistance to dominant discourse and the value of discourse analysis for reflexive practice.

## **Keywords**

dominant discourse, positioning theory, humor, hikikomori, NEET

## **Author Statement**

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A clinical psychologist in Japan

## **Cover Page Footnote**

I would like to acknowledge Mrs. Suzuki, who was my client in this paper. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Winslade, who was my supervisor in California State University San Bernardino. Without them, I could not have written the paper.

### What is dominant discourse?

I am from Japan. What occurred to you when you read that? You might have brought to mind an image of a food (such as sushi), a piece of clothing (such as a kimono), a city (such as Tokyo), a form of entertainment (such as anime), a religion (such as Zen), a philosophy (such as Bushido), a sport (such as sumo), geography (such as Mt. Fuji), a people with particular qualities (such as hard-workers) and so on. Even though you do not know about Japan or Japanese very much, you can talk about Japan, partly because you have learned those images consciously or unconsciously from daily life at school, in conversations with friends, and through the media. Sometimes you might have conveyed those images to your neighborhood in some form of talk such as discussing, chattering, gossiping, writing (letters or brief essays), and texting (with Twitter or Facebook). Those images, produced and neglected through human interactions, construct what Japan is and who Japanese people are. In other words, your images have the power to produce, maintain and reproduce particular interpretations. To put it simply, the images are forms of discourse. Technically speaking, discourse is a kind of frame of our interpretation (Burr, 1995), and discourses can be considered as social practices which construct things (Foucault, 1972).

While there are many different discourses, there are some that affect relations between people and create forms of dominance. They are called dominant discourses (Hare-Mustin, 1994). The above images do partly reflect Japan, but they do not represent Japan well. Most Japanese eat sushi only occasionally, because it is expensive in most cases. Also, many Japanese are as unfamiliar with kimonos, sumo, Zen, and Bushido as most Western people are. In addition, at least as far as I am concerned, I have never been to Mt. Fuji, I have lived in a city in Kanawaga, and I know little about anime. I agree that many Japanese people are

hard-workers, but I know many Japanese people who are not, and some Western people who are also hard-workers. However, these images about Japan are popular in Western countries and may have produced particular exotic representations. Thus, dominant discourse highlights one aspect and makes people believe that it is true, while it suppresses other possible interpretations.

A dominant discourse, however, is one that strongly influences us. For example, as a visiting scholar in California State University San Bernardino, I often studied at my office until late at night. People would often say to me as a result, “You are Japanese.” Such utterances reflect dominant discourse about Japanese people in the characterization of a Japanese person as a hard-worker. At first, I did not think so. In fact, I did not spend much time studying, because I always got up late in the morning (to be honest, at noon), and then I came to the office much later than other people. After a while, however, I started to think that I studied hard till late at night, because I was Japanese, and that I was a little bit stranger than others, as if I was a workaholic. This is an example of the power of dominant discourse. Dominant discourse invites us to judge ourselves against social norms and to normalize ourselves along the lines of force created by the discourse, while not usually noticing the power of the discourse (Hare-Mustin, 1994; Monk, Winslade, & Sinclair, 2008; Soal & Kottler, 1996). If I had not reminded myself of the fact that I had gotten up late at noon, I might have kept seeing myself as strange, in accordance with the dominant discourse.

### Deconstructing dominant discourse in therapy and counseling

The idea of dominant discourse is important for therapists and counselors, because many people who need therapy and counseling are influenced negatively by the dominant discourses that prevail in their societies (Soal & Kottler, 1996). Indeed, many

dominant discourses are not bad, but, since dominant discourse is familiar and taken-for-granted by a given society (Monk, Winslade, & Sinclair, 2008), it often constructs particularly minorities in a way that they would not prefer, and sometimes even forces them to think about themselves in that way. White (2011a) pointed out that many clients cap off their problem narratives with negative identity conclusions, such as, “This shows how inadequate I am” (p. 5). According to White, it is because modern power presses them to construct themselves along the lines specified by dominant discourses. It is hard to challenge dominant discourses, however, because “they are part of the identity of most members of any society, and they influence attitudes and behaviors” (Hare-Mustin, 1994, pp. 1-2). Therefore, from the viewpoint of the concept of discourse, the aim of therapy can be seen as to deconstruct dominant discourse (Georgaca & Avdi, 2009).

So, how is dominant discourse deconstructed in therapy and counseling? There are many papers that focus on this question (for example, Kararza & Avdi, 2011; Madill & Barkham, 1997). In this paper, we illustrate how dominant discourse can be deconstructed by the use of self-deprecating humor. Self-deprecating humor has not been focused on in this way before now, though it has been pointed out that humor is useful for deconstructing dominant discourses, especially for minorities (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). Tsukawaki, Fukuda and Higuchi (2011) found that expressing self-deprecating humor (strictly speaking it translates as “self-defeating humor”) contributes positively to mental health in Japan, while previous research in Western countries has assumed that it is bad for mental health. In this paper, we will show how deconstructing dominant discourse can be related to local, rather than universal culture.

## **Discourse Analysis and Positioning Theory**

In this paper, we use discourse analysis from the viewpoint of positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) for analyzing data. Discourse analysis is literally a method for analyzing discourse. However, discourse analysis is not a standardized systematic methodology, so much as a psychological approach based on social constructionism (Willig, 2001). Therefore, there are many different ideas and methods, even though they use the same term of discourse based on postmodern ideas.

In therapy and counseling fields, researchers have used discourse analysis mainly for examining two aspects: session interactions that construct or deconstruct clients’ problems, and the impact of wider socio-cultural discourse on clients and therapists (Georgaca & Avdi, 2009). That is to say, the word discourse implies micro-interaction processes in some cases, while it means macro-interpretation flames towering over us in other cases. However, both perspectives should be considered when examining therapy and counseling practices. We believe that positioning theory is useful for analyzing these two aspects together.

Positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) examines how people position themselves and others in discourse. When examining positioning, using the concept of the positioning triad or positioning triangle is recommended by the above authors, which consists of three aspects: position, speech act, and storyline.

A position is a cluster of rights and duties given to people in a particular discourse. For example, once when I went to a department office, a staff member looked at me suspiciously and said to me, “That is a staff entrance,” because she positioned me as a student, not a visiting scholar. At the same time, I also lost a right to use the entrance and had imposed on me the duty of using another one, even though, as a visiting scholar, I had used the staff entrance freely before.

Note that her utterance, “That is a staff entrance,” functioned as a prohibition on students against using a staff entrance. When saying something becomes doing something it is called a speech act (Austin, 1962). Note that her utterance becomes a prohibition because she positioned herself as a staff member in the department, and me as not belonging to that category. If I were positioned as a staff member, her utterance would become a different kind of speech act, such as making sure. Thus, position and speech act are related.

Positioning and speech acts also link to the concept of storyline. After the above interaction, I said to her, “Can I use a hand truck? I want to carry water into my office.” And then she said, “Whose office?” Interestingly, she did not take my utterance literally. Her distrustful look suggested that she must think of me as a student who had said or done something wrong, or who was possibly being rude and lying, because I had used the staff entrance without a diffident look and I had tried to use a hand truck which was only allowed to be used by faculty members. In any case, it is reasonable to think that her storylines included a contrast between a good staff member and a bad student. From the storyline, we can understand clearly her speech act, “Whose office?” It was not only a question, but also a speech act expressing a doubt. It could explain why the word “my” in “my office” had been ignored. Thus, position, speech act and storyline are interconnected closely.

The staff member’s positioning of me happened in a micro-interaction. Meanwhile, the positioning was based on wider contextual issues. As we know, students do not care about school rules as much as do the staff. Faculty members should instruct their students, and especially international students, as they often misunderstand due to language and culture problems. In addition, in this case, there might be a discourse that young people must be students, because I looked much younger than I was. Thus, her

positioning was influenced by a macro discourse. However, macro discourse can be changed by micro discourse. If I could have explained myself in a different way, there would have arisen a different positioning triangle. In fact, after questioning, answering, explaining, and listening, she finally realized that I was a visiting scholar. Then, she immediately introduced herself to me, and lent me a hand truck with a smile. It reflected how a positioning shift in micro interaction could change our positioning within a macro discourse. Thus, positioning theory helps us understand interactions from within both micro and macro discourses.

### Hikikomori and NEET

In this paper, using positioning theory, we examine a case of a counseling consultation about *hikikomori* and *NEET*, which was conducted in a counseling office in Japan. Hikikomori and NEET are serious social problems in Japan. We think that they are good examples of dominant discourses in Japan.

Hikikomori is the Japanese word that means withdrawal. In a helping context, the word represents “those who have withdrawn into their homes for over half a year, and have had no relationship with others, except for their family, and no social participation during that time. It cannot be assumed that other mental disorders are the main causes of the problem” (Saito, 2003; translated by the author).

Although NEET is similar to hikikomori, the word, which originated in England, stands for not participating in education, employment, and training (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). While NEET originally applies to young people aged between sixteen and eighteen, the definition in Japan extends to “those of the non-working population who do not do housework or go to school, ranging from 15 to 34 years old” (The Ministry of Health, Labour & Welfare, 2013; translated by the author).

Although these two words refer to particular ontological states by definition, they remind most people in Japan of negative dominant discourses, or deficit discourses, as described hereafter. Thus, this study also shows how a client is affected negatively by these two dominant discourses, as well as how self-deprecating humor is effective in deconstructing these discourses.

Strictly speaking, hikikomori and NEET have different definitions. In this paper, however, we regard these words as the same, because most Japanese use these words with the same meaning, and the client in this paper did not distinguish between them.

## METHOD

### The Client

The client, Mrs. Suzuki (pseudonym), was a 60 year-old female. She had a son who had stayed at home and had seldom gone out for about ten years, since he had failed a university entrance exam. She was very worried about his future. Although her son refused to come to our consulting office, she hoped that she could consult a counselor about him. Through our regular sessions, she gained much more confidence about relating to him. In addition, the relationship between her and her son, that had been seriously problematic at the beginning of the consulting, had gotten rather better.

She did not want to use any social or private supports for hikikomori or NEET, because she had seen that some staff members in a public health center dealt with their clients badly when she was a member of the center as a health nurse. Meanwhile, she wanted to know how to change her son's hikikomori state, with her support. I thought that it was unlikely that her son would change his state on his own, however, because he was still in the same situation as at the beginning of our consultations two years previously.

Since her son had refused to come to me or seek any other support, I gave her a list of some support services for hikikomori or

NEET during the fortieth session. At the next session (the 41st session), she told me that she would accept my proposal and she had seen a support website on the list. She also said that she had felt uneasy about my proposal, because doing so would label her son as hikikomori. After the session, she had begun to think of using such support more constructively than before, though she still felt hesitant about using it. Thus, we think that dominant discourses about hikikomori and NEET were deconstructed to a certain extent, from the 40th session to the 41st session.

The consultation was stopped at the 64th session, because she had gone to the quake-hit area in order to support refugees as a health nurse. Our consulting never resumed and came to an end at her request.

### Data Collection

The data for this study was recorded by a digital voice recorder and transcribed by the therapist after each session. We also used the data written by Mrs. Suzuki about her daily episodes as memoranda. She gave these to me every session so that I could understand what had happened in her interactions with her son. The data from the intake interview to the 41st session was analyzed, but the aim of this paper is to examine how a particular example of dominant discourse was deconstructed, which seemed to happen between the 40th session and the 41st session.

### Data Analysis

This study uses discourse analysis, based on positioning theory. As mentioned above, discourse analysis is an approach to the analysis of conversation, rather than a particular method, and it has no agreed-upon standardized procedure (Burr, 1995; McLeod, 2001). It is also the same in the case of positioning theory. We nevertheless followed the sixteen steps suggested by Billig (1998), and analyzed the data from the viewpoint of positioning theory as follows, because we

thought that the analysis procedure should be clear as much as possible.

First, we read repeatedly the documents of the consultations and extracted the parts where Mrs. Suzuki referred to hikikomori (including NEET). Next, we identified some dominant discourses about hikikomori, examining how she talked about them. Thirdly, we examined how she positioned herself and her son in relation to these dominant discourses, from the viewpoint of positioning theory. Finally, we examined how the dominant discourses had been deconstructed. For that purpose, we analyzed some data from the 41st session in detail, because in this session she told the therapist about several daily episodes experienced between the 40th and the 41st session.

### Ethical Approval

I sent a letter to Mrs. Suzuki one year after the therapy was interrupted, and told her that I was interested in what had happened in our sessions and asked to use the recorded data, the session documents, and the documents written by her. She signed the consent form, agreeing to its use. Approval was obtained from the office where I worked and from the Institutional Review Board in a research institute to which I belonged. I have changed some of the nouns in the data, so as not to identify the client.

## RESULTS

Analyzing the data, we found that Mrs. Suzuki adopted two main positions in our consultations: one involved positioning her son as non-hikikomori, and another

involved positioning herself as a problematic parent.

### Positioning her son as non-hikikomori

From the beginning of our consulting, Mrs. Suzuki had narrated the story of her son as not hikikomori. Telling the story in this way functioned as the performing of a speech act of resistance to deficit discourse, which is comprised of a set of vocabularies emphasizing abnormal aspects and positioning an individual as incompetent (Gergen, 1994; Winslade & Monk, 2001). For example, she talked about hikikomori in the 35th session (see table 1). According to her explanation, hikikomori referred to people who did nothing but eating and sleeping, and were fat (lines 4-5). From her viewpoint, it indicated personal problems, such as laziness. She also regarded hikikomori as applying to those who were not able to “go out” (line 7) because of their problems. She meant that hikikomori people were not capable of going out, or of making a breakthrough in their withdrawal.

It is possible to conclude that such positioning in relation to hikikomori might reflect resistance to deficit discourse. If her son were positioned as hikikomori, it would mean that there was little possibility of his changing. That was one of the reasons that she said, “If a slight shift happens, (...) I suppose he will go out (...) I feel like that” (lines 1-2). In other words, positioning her son as not hikikomori would prevent her from losing hope for him to change. Such positioning could be risky, however, because it could divert her and her son away from any support for hikikomori.

**Table 1**

1	S*:	If a slight shift happens, well, I suppose he will go out (1.4) but, I, you know, I
2		don't know, but I feel like that
3		(...)
4	S:	I may have prejudice of the hikikomori. well, it is like, those who do nothing,
5		only eat and sleep, you know, get really fat and so on. such hikikomori, as I can

6	say so without knowing other hikikomori people, I think that, with those
7	((states)) they can't go out

\*S stands for Mrs. Suzuki.

### Positioning herself as a problematic parent

Mrs. Suzuki had sometimes narrated the story in a way that constituted her as one of the causes of her son's state, positioning herself as a problematic parent. In extract 2, she thought of herself as a bad mother who was "some fraction of the cause" (line 3) and like "Jung's great mother" (line 6). She also regarded herself as a bad wife, saying that taking initiatives with her husband had affected her son negatively (lines 7-11). Such positioning was influenced by a "problematic parent" discourse in which children's problems originate from their parents' problems, such as wrongful nurturing, lack of loving, a bad relationship between the parents, their personal problems, and so on. This discourse is very common and strong in Japan. For example, a TV personality had to resign his programs recently, because his son was arrested, even though his son was over thirty years old. First, the TV personality said that he bore no responsibility, because his son was an adult. This statement led him to resign from his programs, however, since it provoked people's antipathy. That antipathy was also affected by the scandal of his sexual harassment of another newscaster. So his son's arrest was easily interpreted from within a problematic parent discourse, such as, "Like father, like son."

Mrs. Suzuki's positioning as a problematic parent connects to patriarchal discourse. As she suspects that she would affect her son negatively, she refers to her relationship with her husband, "Although I've saved my husband's face seemingly, I've often taken the initiative in doing anything virtually" (lines 6-7). This utterance suggests that a wife should follow her husband on the basis of patriarchal gender discourse. In Japan, such discourse is still as common as in other countries, although there are many who resist

it. Along the line of the dominant norm, her "initiative" could be seen as inappropriate for a wife, and therefore, she could pose a problem for her family.

Sometimes, positioning as a problematic parent is also authorized by a scientific discourse, especially a psychological one. For example, she used the psychological term, "Jung's great mother" (line 6), when she explained that she had done something wrong. She also said, "As you research, if I've affected (him) negatively, I didn't notice it." The "you" meant clinical psychologists in general, rather than just me, because she knew that I was a clinical psychologist in a research institute. The suggestion was that she took more account of psychological knowledge than she actually acknowledged. In other words, she accepted the judgment of "science," even though she did not know her actual crime. Believing in "scientific" perspectives more than one's own ideas is very common in counseling or therapy, not just in this client's case.

Note that her positioning might be affected by dominant gender discourse as the intersection of the discourses above. Both the problematic parent discourse and the patriarchal discourse stress an "ideal" role for a woman, such as caretaking or maintaining a moderate emotional demeanor. Scientific discourse also connects to the gender role. In Japan, a woman is much less likely to be associated with science than a man. For example, a Japanese woman scientist became famous recently, because she made a big discovery and her article was published in *Nature*. However, her personality and lifestyle were reported much more than the discovery itself or her impact on the scientific field. Most of the television and internet news said that she was beautiful, that she usually dressed in *Kappongi* (traditional clothing for a housewife in Japan), that her favorite color



was pink, and so on. Dominant gender discourse implies that science is not the area for a woman, or a woman should not be a productive agent of science, but a passive recipient of it. Therefore, we think that Mrs. Suzuki's positioning is affected by the ways in which multiple discourses about gender are interconnected. Positioning her as a problematic parent imposes different duties on her at the same time, such as saving a husband's face, being a great mother, and accepting scientific evidence. Thus, her positioning should be seen in terms of the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2008), rather than seeing each discrete discourse separately.

Positioning as a problematic parent could be negatively inflected, because telling the story in this way could constitute a speech act of self-reproach or remorse. However, it was hard to stop positioning herself as such. She kept arguing that she was a bad parent, though the therapist denied this idea in lines 1-2 and line 9. It was more important, even though it cast doubt on her own ideas, to agree with the therapist's statement (line 10). Her deferral to the discourse, despite her agreement with the therapist, reflected the force of the discourse that made her judge herself against its norms. (See table 2)

**Table 2**

1	Th*:	I don't think that the current state of your son is directly linked to what's
2		wrong with you.
3	S:	but, I was some fractions of the cause, right? actually, there are people who
4		don't become like that.
5		(...)
6	S:	maybe, Jung's great mother can be true of me. I'm not quite sure, though.
7		although I've saved my husband's face seemingly, I've often taken the
8		initiative in doing anything virtually. Now is so, too.
9	Th:	I think it isn't that bad
10	S:	I think so, but as you research, if I've affected ((him)) negatively, I didn't
11		notice it.

\*Th stands for the therapist.

**Table 3\*<sup>1</sup>**

1	S:	When watching news about the abolition of <i>Wakamono Jiritsu Juku</i> ,* <sup>2</sup> my son
2		said, "Although they say the organization is for NEET, it is lukewarm. It is
3		impossible to make a route to a full-time worker in that way! Those who are
4		taking part in it are not NEET. I am a perfect NEET." I wondered if he
5		tried to get emotional stability by justifying his current situation. But when
6		he said, "I am a perfect NEET," I almost burst out laughing, because his
7		way of talking was a little bit funny. Maybe it was the first time for my son
8		to call himself NEET.

\*<sup>1</sup> This Table was not transcribed but reproduced from the session document and the client's document, because the therapist did not record this session with a recorder.

\*<sup>2</sup> *Wakamono Jiritsu Juku* is a government project providing employment support for NEET.

### Deconstructing dominant discourses by self-deprecating humor

As mentioned above, Mrs. Suzuki had started to think about using support services for hikikomori after the 41st session.

What led her to make this change? In fact, we cannot find a clear specific reason, because she did not say anything clearly and we only noticed the change when analyzing the data several years after the consultations. In the 41st session, however, she reported an exceptional episode, just before she told the therapist that she had felt uneasy about the therapist's proposal in the 40th session. She could, however, accept it and had looked at a website. Therefore, we suspect that the exceptional episode was a turning point. Table 3 showed this exceptional episode.

The story contrasts with the positioning of her son as non-hikikomori and non-NEET and of herself as a problematic parent. When she listened to her son's declaration of NEET, she almost laughed (lines 6-7). If she had not wanted to position her son as NEET in order to avoid deficit discourse as in extract 1, or if she had positioned herself as a problematic parent as in extract 2, she would have denied her son's statement or reproached herself, instead of laughing. It suggests that her son's way of saying, "I am a perfect NEET" (line 6), made her respond to the dominant discourses in a different or exceptional way. Therefore, we believe that her son's statement, to some extent at least, served for him as deconstructive of the dominant discourses from which she had suffered. So, why did her son's declaration make this deconstruction possible? We think that a possible reason was self-deprecating humor.

The words, hikikomori and NEET, had social force behind them that positioned her and her son negatively, to the extent that she and her son had not been able to avoid these forces and could not change the social meanings of these words by themselves. In a sense, these words exerted dominance over her and her son. This is called forced self-positioning, in which people are positioned by others, not by themselves (Van Langenhove & Harre, 1999).

By contrast, his utterance, "I am a perfect NEET," (lines 5-6) can be seen as

deliberate self-positioning, a move by which people express their identities agentically (Van Langenhove & Harre, 1999). It was paradoxically an indicator of the power to deconstruct dominant discourses. Usually, a person who is positioned as NEET does not self-position as NEET deliberately, because the word constructs him or her negatively. Apparently, her son's declaration was unnatural. It is conceivably one of the reasons that she heard "his way of talking was a little bit funny" (line 7). We think that such unusual self-positioning might have deconstructed the social force of the dominant discourse for her at least a little, because it made the powerful but obscure norms visible, clarifying what was natural and what was not.

However, it is possible that positioning himself as NEET reflected his obedience to the dominant discourse, or the desperation of his state. Why didn't she hear his utterances in this way? Note that her son said that he was "a perfect NEET" (line 6). It is possible to interpret the statement as self-deprecating humor, not just as obedient self-positioning. The expression suggested that he thought of himself as a person who fitted the label *made by the dominant society* "perfectly." Moreover, he was criticizing the mild application of the word, claiming that, "Those who are taking part in it are not NEET" (line 4). He was implicitly asserting that he should be called NEET, while people usually avoid being labeled as such. This assertion is contradictory and, therefore, ironical. In fact, she almost burst out laughing in response to his way of talking. Thus, his statement is not a straightforward example of self-positioning as NEET, at least for her. In other words, she heard her son's "NEET" positioning as the kind of humor that aims to make people laugh using self-deprecation.

Because of the power of the dominant discourse, Mrs. Suzuki positioned her son as non-hikikomori and non-NEET and herself as a problematic parent. However, when her son called himself "a perfect NEET," she responded to his positioning in an unusual

way, such as laughing and thinking that “it was a little bit funny”. After that time, she had begun to think of using support services for hikikomori or NEET more constructively than before. Therefore, we think that her son’s statement gave her new possibilities to deal with her son’s difficult situation, as his self-positioning sounded self-deprecating humor for her.

Indeed, there are other possibilities for her to think about using such support services. She might decide to think of using them, because of the television program. She might look at the website for some reasons. Her husband or her friends might recommend it to her. She might think about it, just because the therapist told her about that in the last session. Similarly, there are other interpretations of her son’s self-positioning. He might position himself as a patient with little hope and embrace a deficit discourse. His positioning might challenge a social discourse, in which NEET or hikikomori was seen just as a personal problem, rather than a social problem. He might see himself as a professional who had some opinions in opposition to the social discourse in which NEET could be resolved if they were given jobs. We should think about his statement as reflecting the intersection of multiple dominant discourses, just like Mrs. Suzuki’s.

However, it is a fact that Mrs. Suzuki responded to her son’s self-positioning as NEET in an unusual and exceptional way by laughing, and it is reasonable to think that she heard his self-positioning as a kind of self-deprecating humor as analyzed above. Thus, at least a little, self-deprecating humor helped to deconstruct the dominant discourse affecting her negatively, and gave her the possibility of an alternative positioning in the dominant discourse.

## Discussion and conclusions

Through analyzing a consultation about hikikomori and NEET, this paper examines how dominant discourse can position a client negatively, and also how such

discourse can be deconstructed. The dominant discourses about hikikomori and NEET were deconstructed through self-deprecating humor, because it clarified and challenged their powers. The power of these discourses is strong, but usually invisible. Such deconstruction made it visible and allowed the client to think of using some support services for hikikomori and NEET constructively. Thus, this study also reveals some aspects of how dominant discourses limit a client’s possibility and also how deconstructing them produces a positive change.

In this study, it was found that self-deprecating humor has deconstructive power in relation to dominant discourses, because it can produce contradictory as well as humorous utterances. Contradiction and irony have the power to deconstruct the strength of the dominance of particular discourses. Because dominant discourse reflects a kind of common sense, it is, therefore, seen as natural (Hare-Mustin, 1994; Monk et al., 2008). Usually, people who are labeled as hikikomori or NEET do not position themselves as such. They are more commonly positioned in this discourse from the outside forcefully and negatively. Thus, deliberate self-positioning and self-deprecation can produce “unnatural” utterances, and denaturalize the “natural” assumptions produced within dominant discourse.

It would be problematic for a person to position himself or herself with a negative label or to diminish himself or herself with irony. Humor is not perfect, and sometimes hurts people. Why might such a speech act have a positive effect, even though it could produce contradictory utterances? Why did it not hurt Mrs. Suzuki? One reason might lie in the “self” of self-deprecating humor. We think that the “self” does not represent her son’s personal sense of self, but his social identity, as NEET does. In other words, the “self” is recognized as a product of social dominant discourse.

This “self” had originated from social discourse and had been given to particular people with or without their agreement. That is to say, this self is forced self-positioning. Therefore, referring to himself as NEET reflected an alternative possibility that he could position himself as such by himself, rather than having it foisted on him by social discourse, or by others. In other words, he had taken up a position of agency through which he could construct himself. In consequence, it was more important that his deliberate self-positioning was expressed ironically as self-deprecating humor, when he used the word “perfect.” In this moment, he also defeated the self that was produced by dominant society and that had been positioning him negatively. Note that what was defeated was not him, but his social self, or the product of the dominant discourse. Thus, saying, “I am a perfect NEET,” does not necessarily construct a negative identity. Constructing a negative self can have the power to deconstruct dominant discourse in some cases, especially when it creates humorous effect and agency.

There are several important implications that derive from this study. In particular, it seems useful to connect this study with the word “queer” used often in the gender study and a Japanese idea about self-deprecating humor.

### Queer and NEET

The paradoxical usage of NEET is similar to the use of the word “queer” by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons. The word “queer” was originally a discriminatory word for sexual and gender minorities, but now it often works as an expression of dissension from dominant gender norms and serves as a way of reclaiming their rights by LGBT persons. Halperin (1995) pointed out that “queer” was a word that countered the production of various identities not along the lines specified by dominant norms. The same mechanism can be true in this case. For the client’s son to

use the word “NEET” ironically made room for him to produce new and different identities along lines not governed by dominant discourse. Eve Sedgwick, a sociologist, said in an interview that when LGBT persons called themselves queer, there was a crucial distinction between this and when others called them queer (Jagose, 1996). Similarly, we think, when Mrs. Suzuki’s son positioned himself as NEET in an ironic utterance he made the dominance of the dominant discourse visible, and thus produced the possibility of an alternative discourse.

There are, however, differences between the word “queer” and “NEET” or “hikikomori”. Perhaps the former has more positive connotations than the latter two words. These words are similar to “queer”, however, in that they carry the implication of self-deprecation, and they can be used to object to dominant discourse and then the original negative meaning of the words can change to a more or less positive meaning when the parties use them themselves, as Sedgwick suggests.

It is also possible that there are many different words that are seemingly negative but have the power to deconstruct dominant discourses. It can be significant to find other words like “queer” or “NEET”. However, we should not assume that such powerful effects are possible for all people and at any time. In fact, while one researcher argued that the word “hikikomori” was a new word that could be used by some to narrate their identities, especially when they had no other vocabulary with which to express their experience (Ishikawa, 2007), another researcher pointed out that “hikikomori” was regarded as a negative category by many people, because it totalized them (Shiokura, 1999). Some people have claimed that the word “hikikomori” brought them comfort, because it placed them in a category to which they were able to belong, while at the same time they also felt displeased with its negative connotations (Ninomiya, A, Nabetani,

Kakonee, Iwata, & Nagatomi, 2000). It is important to include the party's own perspective when examining a power of a self-positioning word. Again, we have to remember Sedgwick's suggestion that there is a crucial distinction between whether the person concerned says it or others do so.

### **Cultural power of self-deprecating humor**

It is also important to acknowledge that the effects of self-deprecating humor upon dominant discourse could be based in Japanese culture. In Japan, self-deprecating humor is very popular and familiar. Tsukawaki, Fukuda and Higuchi (2011) found that expressing self-deprecating humor contributed to mental health positively from analyzing responses to survey questionnaires by undergraduate students in Japan. They pointed out that the result contrasted with previous research in European and American countries that had concluded that expressing self-deprecating humor, or using self-defeating humor by definition, was bad for mental health. They discussed the difference in terms of whether or not it involved too much self-sacrifice. We suspect, however, that the interesting distinction with regard to self-deprecating humor results from cultural differences between Western countries and Japan. Given this perspective, self-deprecating humor might be more powerful in Japan than in other countries. It means that the function of ironical self-positioning in deconstructing dominant discourses may be not only limited by cultural context, but also reversed between different cultural contexts. Thus, we should pay attention to unique expressions of cultural resistance to dominant norms, as well as to a variety of dominant discourses themselves.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are several limitations to this study. First of all, the exceptional episode analyzed in this study was reported by Mrs. Suzuki, not by her son. Note that the analysis can apply for her, but not for her son. We

have no way of knowing whether the dominant discourse about hikikomori and NEET was deconstructed for him. Actually we are not even sure that he was using self-deprecating humor when he said "I am a perfect NEET." In this study, we only analyzed her report that her son had called himself NEET in a funny way. Because of that, we cannot conclude definitively that self-positioning and self-deprecating humor have an automatic deconstructive power for her son, even if he used self-deprecating humor. They might be ineffective for him in contrast to his mother. Future studies might examine how people in such a situation use words and how the dominant discourses are deconstructed.

In addition, we should consider that she stopped the consultations. Although she had developed much more confidence in relating to her son, and the relationship between her and her son had become rather better, her son's state had not changed at the end of the consultations. It does not necessarily mean that the consultations were a failure, but we need to consider why she did not resume. In future, we should examine all sessions.

Despite these limitations, our study still offers some insight into how dominant discourse can be deconstructed. While dominant discourse can be very strong, there is also resistance to it everywhere (White, 2011a). To recognize these possibilities and extend them is very useful for helping clients who suffer from its effects. Meanwhile, clients, and even therapists, do not often notice the opportunity for resistance, because dominant discourse is common sense and deeply affects us (Hare-Mustin, 1994; Monk et al, 2008). Thus, it is necessary to become carefully reflexive about our practices. However, this is easier said than done. Such deconstruction acts against our common sense in a way. One implication is that to doubt our common sense is sometimes important, in order to notice the chance to help clients. Although it is impossible to remove dominant discourse

from society, it is not necessary to act in concert with it (White, 2011b). We believe that discourse analysis including positioning

theory helps us to be reflexive, as this study shows, though it is not “perfect.”

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